



Sawmill Park & Sinclair Wash

great birding in the center of town
(AWWE script by Diane Hope & Rose Houk, May 2014)

Arizona Watchable Wildlife Experience
www.azwatchwildlife.com

Rose Houk: The “brownfield” site where one of Flagstaff’s main sawmills operated from 1908 to 1993 has been transformed into Coconino County’s Sawmill Park. It’s a place to get ideas about backyard wildlife gardening, and is also the jumping off point for some great wildlife watching along nearby Sinclair Wash – both handily located close to downtown and with the Flagstaff Urban Trail running alongside the wash.

On a spring day outside the Willow Bend Environmental Education Center, the grasslands attract mourning cloaks -- butterflies with a wingspan of two to four inches across, purple-black on the upper wings with bright yellow margins. Unlike many butterflies, they prefer to drink tree sap—especially from oaks. Mourning cloaks will also feed on rotten fruit and occasionally sip flower nectar. They hibernate under the bark of ponderosa pine, and are one of the first insects to emerge in spring. In summer in the gardens surrounding the center, native blooms like the bright red firecracker penstemons are a big draw for hummingbirds.

From Willow Bend, take the trail that drops down into Sinclair Wash for a closer look. The basalt boulders on the slopes are great rock squirrel territory. These squirrels often have dens down underneath the rocks. When they come out of their dens, they’ll often perch right out on top of a boulder. If you hear a squirrel giving a succession of single very loud bird-like barks, stop and look up ... a hawk may be circling overhead. Ground squirrels are here too – chipmunks are about a half to a third the size of a rock squirrel and easily recognized by alternating dark and white stripes on their faces. The golden mantled ground squirrel is slightly larger than a chipmunk, look for a white eye ring and a white stripe down the side of the body, rather than on the face.

Sinclair Wash is the closest approximation to a riparian area you’ll find in the center of Flagstaff. Extending from the trail head here, east towards I-40 wetlands and all the way west to Rogers Lake, there’s typically little flowing water except just after monsoon storms. Even so, it tends to be damp and green -- with a lot of grass and herbaceous plants. And though more disturbed than a natural drainage, provides food, cover, and a travel corridor for animals — birds among them.

Whenever you visit Sawmill Park and Sinclair Wash, bring your binoculars and sit quietly. You don’t even need to get here that early – between 8 and 10am ... and after 3pm, you should see plenty of bird activity. As Sawmill Park in summer, you’ll commonly see lesser goldfinches and broad-tailed

hummingbirds at the feeders. But venture on down the trail into the wash proper and you're in some surprisingly good birding habitat. Join us now an audio bird tour of Sinclair Wash with local Audubon Society member Jason Wilder...

Guided bird walk with Jason Wilder

JASON WILDER: *We're standing in the area where the trail meets Sinclair Wash – and these steep ravines create different slope aspects that create a real diversity of plant & bird life. In the willows down at bottom of wash you'll find really good cover for warblers, house wrens & other birds that need a lot of cover ... spotted towhee. In the trees nearby I can hear lazuli buntings, blue grosbeaks, Virginias & yellow warblers in the trees up above. They would all be here in the summer. ... This area gets quite a bit of sun so its best first thing. Start at Sawmill Park & walk a short or a long way in the wash, down the urban trail. Immediately entering the wash you'll start to pick up a diversity of birds."*

[... pssshing sound..]

"The noise that I made its called a pishing sound & it's meant to mimic a bird that is making a warning call, so a bird that might have encountered an owl or another predator that it's warning other birds about. So that tends to bring in other birds to come & see what's up & they'll start to make noise –o help aid in scaring the predator away."

"The blue grosbeak is a really loud forceful chip sound it's not singing right now it's just making a chip note & you'll often hear in this area it accompanied by lazuli buntings which have a much more metallic sound. Both species have males that are a spectacular color of blue. Lazuli buntings also have a bright orange on their breast which is beautiful & in both species the females are just a really drab brown & they can actually be hard to tell apart from one another."

"The Lazuli bunting it makes a call note that's very distinctive, it's a metallic sound that almost sounds like a spring popping or twanging. If you hear it you know there's one in the vicinity."

"Pshhging So that scared the blue grosbeak up to the top of those oaks to get a good look at us. They have bright orange-ish wing patches that go with the blue. (Runners). A blue grosbeak has an enormous beak just like the name of the bird implies. You could confuse it with other blue birds that like the same kind of habitat like an indigo bunting, but they have much smaller pointier bills whereas a blue grosbeak has an enormous wedge shaped bill. So if you see a blue bird with a wedge shaped bill – it's probably a blue grosbeak. The head if you get a view of it at all - if you get a side view the bill is almost as large as the head itself. It's a song that doesn't stick in my head at all it's very fluid but there's no rhythm to it that I can catch on to."

"In the bottom of the wash anywhere where there's really dense shrubby cover, so in the willows here at the bottom, house wrens will nest, so they're very cryptic birds but occasionally they'll sing a really strident song and come out on perches – a very small brown bird with a cocked tail. And they're common in the bottom of the wash. Also yellow warblers – they like the overstory so they'll be high up in the trees, especially these cottonwoods that grow out of the bottom of the wash. You'll see yellow warblers, they

nest here in small numbers all summer long. A yellow warbler is bright yellow just virtually everywhere, especially in the spring & summer if you see a bird that is all yellow, that is up high in the trees that's typically a yellow warbler. In the fall some of the juveniles will start to look a dingier gray. One thing it has is a yellow that forms an eye ring around it so even on a grayer or drabber bird you'll see a yellow eye ring – and very few birds have yellow eye rings. So a warbler that is either bright yellow or yellowish gray with a yellow eye ring would be a yellow warbler – females are also yellow. A little bit drabber typically, in the spring a male will just be a bright canary yellow – occasionally with some brownish stripes on the front of it.”

“Virginia’s warbler has a very bright yellow chest and a very bright yellow backside. So coming or going they look like a bright yellow bird and from the side, they just look like a drab gray bird. But they’re really very colorful if you get a good look at them.”

“Typically the first place to start with any bird is to get an overall impression of its size & its shape, so a bird that is a song bird with a thin narrow bill, that’s a good candidate to be a warbler. A bird with a heavier bill that looks like it’d be made for eating seeds, that’s a better candidate for a finch type. So getting a sense of the bird’s proportions, bill size & shape is a good place to start. Now there’s pygmy nuthatches. Pygmy nuthatches are common anywhere you find pine trees and so you could hear them calling a minute ago, they make a very wheezy repetitive noise where they’re ‘tooting’ repetitively.”

RH: Jason has some tips on how to get started identifying birds – including using one of the bird call identification apps - and taking photos. Ordinarily, you want to walk slowly and quietly with ears tuned to bird song and calls. But, the trail along Sinclair Wash is popular with cyclists too ... and he says it is possible to bird from a bike ... just about!

*WILDER: “Birding on a bicycle pretty challenging. You tend to move quickly & so you a little bit closer to birds than you might if you tried to creep up on foot, especially if you’re just birding by ear & not trying to see the birds, you can bird on a bicycle pretty effectively. You want to go slow enough so you can hear birds & not just scare them away. I would peddle slowly, stop a lot – the key for birding always is to stop & use your ears – they’re the best clue birds are in the vicinity even if you’re not gonna recognize what a bird is – knowing that the bird is there gives you the ability to see it quicker. There are many different smart phone apps that are good at playing back bird calls. The Cornell Lab of Ornithology & also a website called xeno-canto.org have extensive worldwide collections of bird songs. For bird sounds there’s a program called *iBird Pro* that works on Android devices & probably on iPhones – it has a great library of sounds that’s very easy to pull up.”*

“If you can take pictures that’s a really good way to compare what you’ve seen – just Google-ing potential birds – there are websites – the Northern Arizona Audubon has a website where anybody can post & picture & say I just saw this bird & I don’t know what it is – someone will chime in & give you some pointers, some identification.”

RH: This site has great birding all year long. Start looking in spring when snowmelt leaves puddles – and you may see northern parula warblers as well as American redstarts. The fall migration is a good time too, says Jason Wilder....

WILDER: *"In migration expect to find an even greater diversity of birds – orange crowned warblers, MacGillivray's warblers, often overhead violet green swallows, barn swallows. There are really nice birds here all winter long. In the winter this is a good place for sparrows & finches, so you'll get white crowned sparrows in abundance, dark eyed juncos, finches like red crossbills use this area pretty extensively – they'll be high up in pine trees. I've seen evening grosbeaks here which are a beautiful finch – they're here year round but I see them much more often in the winter than I do in the summertime. The males have a spectacular enormous yellow bill – so if you can see that & they're a black & yellow bird really striking colors, beautiful to see. Lewis' woodpeckers are here in the wash – they're a beautiful dark green colored woodpecker – very unusual for a woodpecker. Some of the best birds that have been recorded here have been found in the winter. It's so close to town, people will stop in here often & I think any area that has the mix of habitat types that this does & also provides such good cover for birds – the birds are here & it's a place that's easily accessible for people to come & visit."*

Outro

RH: If you've enjoyed birding at Sawmill Park and Sinclair Wash, why not carry on down the Wash east for more birding at the I-40 wetlands. And don't miss out on the Mount Elden audio tour – where you'll hear more useful tips from Jason Wilder on bird watching there all year!